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CANADA

Hundreds of anti-lockdown, anti-mask protesters take to the streets again in downtown Barrie

By **Cheryl Browne, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter** Barrie Advance

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READ THE CONVERSATION

Calls for 'Freedom' rang through the downtown core of Barrie as Freedom Rally marchers walked peacefully from the newly fenced in Meridian Place to Centennial Park on Saturday, May 1.

More than 200 un-masked walkers enjoyed the sunshine as they pushed children in strollers and carried signs as they left their former rallying stage during the morning. Mayor Jeff Lehman had called for an emergency order April 29 to close the centre to unlawful public gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

"I'm here to express my opinion to make a statement for anti-lockdown," said Scott Hughes in the crowd as they arrived at Centennial Park. "I'm not concerned about COVID-19 because it's all fake."

While most Ontarians are hunkering down to protect themselves and their families by social distancing and wearing face masks, the freedom protestors eschew face coverings, even though it's been scientifically proven that masks play a critical role in preventing someone from catching and spreading the potentially deadly virus.

"I'm pissed off with our government shattering our constitutional rights and don't believe (Premier) Doug Ford and (Prime Minister) Justin Trudeau are upholding our laws and the constitution," Larry Kraemer said of the lockdown and his need to protest.

For the most part, rally attendees listened politely to event organizer Tyler Nicholson pump up the crowd through his megaphone on the stage in the cement pavilion.

Singer Crysta Perpetto led the assembled in singing the national anthem, including a man who wore only a speedo with the Canadian flag affixed to the front, and sneakers.

One man was arrested as he name-called the protestors and yelled angrily they should return to Meridian Place and tear down the fences.

Barrie Police Service officers who had followed the march and were standing on the periphery arrested the large man after an initial struggle.

Police would rather there was no gathering at all said Barrie Sgt. Toni Talarico.

"We urge people to stay at home, follow the regulations, and to not gather unlawfully to help stop the spread of COVID-19," Talarico said.

Former Simcoe County school board trustee Bud Watson sat on a bench near the beach wearing a mask. He shook his head when queried about his participation at the event.

“No, I’m not with them and no, they shouldn’t be gathering,” Watson said. “It’s a big concern – not wearing masks – someone’s going to catch COVID-19 and pass it on.”

Multiple rallies have been held at the site since March, even though they are in defiance of Ontario government’s stay-at-home and emergency orders, city rules and Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit COVID-19 safety guidelines.

Simcoe.com has reached out to Barrie Police and city officials for an update on how they responded to the rally.

About 300 people gathered at the downtown square April 24. Barrie police said officers charged between 10 and 15 individuals under the Reopening Ontario Act. One woman at the gathering was also arrested and charged with obstructing officers after she refused to provide her name.

OPP charged seven people involved in the anti-lockdown demonstration held at the Midland waterfront on April 24.

Fines are \$750 for anyone failing to comply with an order and \$1,000 for preventing others from following an order. Maximum fines are \$100,000 for individuals and \$10 million for a corporation.

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